

BOOKS, CALENDARS AND SHOWS

by Barbara Kukla

Soon after Connie Woodruff died in 1996, friends began asking me when I was going to write a book about her. Actually, I had little, if any intention of doing so at the time, even though Connie was my best friend. By then, my volume of work as editor of *Newark This Week for The Star-Ledger* had become almost unmanageable. Just about everyone knew me and just about everyone, whether from a church, school or community group, wanted coverage of their events. Without much help, I also served my own secretary, a job in itself. By day's end I was too tired to write another word.

But then one day, when I was looking through pictures of Connie and her family, I had an idea. Why not produce a calendar in her memory? The material was there: photos of Connie with her parents, emceeding community events and with celebrities including Jackie Robinson, Sammy Davis, Jr, Gordon Parks and Sugar (Ray) Robinson, whom she had interviewed during her days at editor of *The Herald-News*, a weekly newspaper that served Newark's black community from the 1930s through the 1950s.

A year later, as part of a memorial service marking the one-year anniversary of Connie's passing, the calendar, *Remembering Connie: A Life Well Lived*, was unveiled. Initial sales following the service at Trinity Cathedral in downtown Newark, where Connie and Bill Woodruff's ashes are interred in the columbarium in the chapel, indicated the fund-raiser in her memory would be a hit.

From Day One, it seemed as if everyone who ever knew Connie wanted one or more copies – friends from the community groups on whose boards she served such the Newark YMCA of Newark and Vicinity; statewide organizations she belonged to like the Democratic National Committee; fellow commissioners on the New Jersey Advisory Commission on the Status of Women and Essex County Board of Taxation and, on a larger plane, her associated from Shirley Chisholm's Black Women's Political Caucus and the National Commission on the Status of Women. Because Connie had helped so many people during a lifetime of service to the Newark community, a profit of \$18,000 was eventually realized.

Because of Connie's love of music – she was a classically trained pianist and played jazz piano with a group during high school – proceeds from the sale of the calendars were used to establish the Connie Woodruff Music Prize, a jazz competition for Newark public high school students. With the help of Bill May, director of music and art for the Newark Public Schools, more than forty students took part in the events at Arts High School on the last Friday night in April for the next four years. The object was to keep jazz alive in Newark as a memorial to Connie. The lure: Lucrative cash prizes. The winning jazz quintet or quartet, for example, walked away with \$1,000; second place, \$500 and third place, \$250. All other bands, generally two or three, received \$100 each for honorable mention. Both the winning singer and instrumental soloist received \$500 for first place; \$250, second, and \$100, third. Honorable mention was \$50.

In addition, first-place winners received student-designed black satin jackets with their names embroidered on the front and First-Place Winner, Connie Woodruff Music Prize, Newark, New Jersey, on the back. All participants also received nicely framed certificates of participation and were treated to sandwiches, sodas and dessert after checking in.

With the creative help of Clarence Jones, an administrator at nearby Essex County College, the Arts High auditorium was transformed into a cabaret setting for each competition. Students were hired to serve as ushers, photographers and videographers. And two jazz greats from Newark were honored each year during the event. Arts High was selected as the site because it had ample parking and was the school was in Newark's Central Ward the neighborhood where Connie lived as a girl.

Of all the competitions, the night when our committee honored Anna Lundy Lewis and Joe Gregory, veterans of Newark's 1940s nightclub scene, probably was the most memorable. Lewis, considered by all a genius on organ, had stopped playing jazz more than fifty years before after taking over as minister of music at Newark's New Point Baptist Church. Gregory, a charming song and dance man who also played piano and drums, was still at it, entertaining at senior citizen centers around town.

That after I received a call from Yvette Glover, Lewis's daughter. "I don't think I'm going to get mother there," she said, meaning that her mother, who was in her early 80s and senile, was being obstinate. "Don't worry," Yvette," I offered. "Everything will be OK. If we have to, we will delay the start of the program until you and your mother get there."

And, so, when 7 p.m. came that night, I announced that there would be a slight delay before we got gong. By 7:15, just as Eleta Caldwell, Arts High's beloved principal brought greetings, I could hear a commotion in the hallway. Right away I knew it was Lewis, our honoree. "I don't want to go in there," she said loudly -- until the door opened and she heard the introductory music. Escorted by her daughter, Lewis walked down the aisle, took her front-row seat and enjoyed every minute of the show.

When it came time for the tribute to Lewis, her daughter Yvette, a popular jazz and blues singer who has performed worldwide, and her grandson, Savion Glover, the internationally heralded king of tap dance, performed in her honor. The students in the audience, including the competitors seated on stage, went wild. Making things even sweeter, Savion and Joe Gregory then teamed for a soft-shoe routine, a throwback to the 1930s and 1940s. What an historic occasion for the City of Newark this was, particularly because Anna Lundy Lewis died the following year.